

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY



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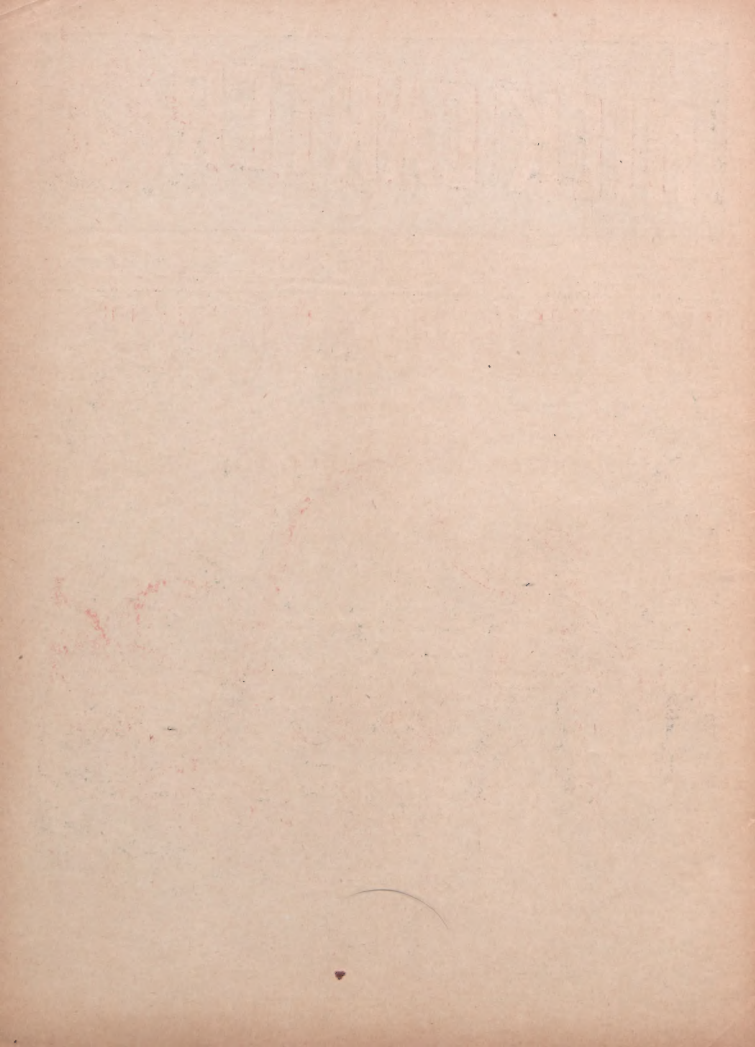
HOLDING UP A NATION

OR
THE LITTLE GIANT RULES THE WORLD



BY THE AUTHOR
OF "NICK CARTER"

The huge python was in the act of darting at this new enemy, but Nick Carter's hand flew forward and a bullet crashed unerringly through the serpent's brain.





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HOLDING UP A NATION;

OR,

The Little Giant Rules the World.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

TALKING STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER.

The locomotive seemed to be breathing in sharp breaths as the injectors forced water into the boilers. In a moment more the train was to start, and Nick Carter, who expected to be among the passengers, and who was standing near the door of the compartment he was to occupy, grasped the hand of Charles Malet, who had accompanied him to the station to bid him godspeed.

But the fates had willed that the detective was not to be a passenger out of St. Petersburg that day.

Nick had swung himself upon the step of the coach; he was hanging with one hand to the rail, and the other was extended for a last parting clasp with Malet, when a boy was seen to dodge past the guards and officials whose business it was to intercept and question all who approached, and although several rough hands were

thrust out to detain him, he succeeded in eluding them, and with a last dash forward he almost fell at the feet of the detective.

He was breathless and faint from running, so that he could not speak, but as he fell he extended a folded slip of paper to Nick.

Opening it hastily—for already the wheels of the train were beginning to revolve—the detective read these words, scrawled upon it, evidently in very great haste:

"For God's sake! don't go. I am in great peril.
"YVONNE."

That was all, but Nick readily recognized the handwriting, notwithstanding the haste in which the words had been written.

Already the train had carried him several feet along the platform, and it was rapidly gaining headway so that within a short distance more—

But there was no short distance more! The appeal went straight to the detective's heart, and without giving the matter even a second thought he swung off upon the platform and walked deliberately back toward Malet, who had followed slowly along when the train got under headway.

The boy who brought the message was already upon his feet again, and had approached quite near to Malet, evidently to seek his protection from the ominous attitude of the guards whom he had so unceremoniously brushed aside in his haste to deliver the note.

"Next train, Nick?" asked Malet.

"I don't know yet. Here, boy; I want you," he added, in Russian.

"Yes, sir," replied the lad, brightly, and in English; Malet's question and Nick's reply had been in English, and the boy had seemed to gather new courage when he heard it. He realized also that while everybody around them understood Russian, it was extremely doubtful if there was a man within earshot who could comprehend a word of English.

"Hello!" exclaimed Nick, glancing more sharply at the lad; "you speak English, eh?"

"No, sir. That's United States that I talk. I can talk in Russian, and French, and English, too, but when I want to say anything straight from the shoulder I talk United States."

"Good! That sounds promising. If there was ever a time in your life when you were required to talk straight from the shoulder, it is now. Where did you get that note you just delivered to me?"

"It was chucked to me from a window. There was a ruble came down with it—and a voice."

"A voice, eh? What kind of a voice?"

"A woman's voice, sir."

"What did it say?"

"It said, 'Hurry to the station. Ask any police officer to point out Charles Malet; he is chief of the palace police. Deliver that note to a man who will be with him, and who is about to take the train out of the city. Hurry! Run! That's all, sir. I got here, and I reckon you are the man she meant.'"

"I reckon I am," said Nick, smiling and imitating the

Southern drawl of the lad. "You got here just in time, as you say. Three seconds later would have been too late; so here are five more rubles for your loss of breath. Now, do you think you could show me the house where you heard the woman's voice?"

"Betcher life!"

"Come along, then. We'll go there."

"Well, sir, I'll take you there all right enough, if you want to go; but maybe when I tell you where it is you won't be after butting in upon the residents without sending your card."

"Do you know whose house it is?"

"Sure."

"Well, whose house is it?"

"The grand duke's."

Nick Carter permitted himself to utter a low whistle.

"You are sure about that?" he asked.

"Sure, as shooting, sir."

"What do you think of that, Malet?" asked Nick, turning to his companion.

"I haven't seen the note yet, Nick."

"Here. Read it. Now, what do you think?"

"Why! I think we had best get along back to my office at the palace before we do any talking. You can wager that not less than a dozen secret service men have seen this little episode of your starting; the boy dashing through the crowd and giving you a note; your leaving the train and talking with the boy and with me; and you mustn't forget that one of the things they saw and commented upon is the fact that the note was handed to you and not to me. Now that you have given it to me, so that all of them can see it, they take it that it is meant for me also; but all the same we'll go to my office and permit the whole outfit to draw the natural inference that the note has something to do with state affairs. We will, of course, take the boy with us."

"Say!" said the lad, breaking in, "if you want to win my eternal regard and esteem, you can just bet your sweet life that you'll take me with you. If you had seen the way I bowled over a big fat guard who wasn't going to let me through the gate, you'd 'a' died laughing. I caught him one where he breathes, and I'll bet

a copec he's laying for me now. You see, Mr. Malet, I didn't have any time to lose."

"That's right, my lad. You didn't. Mr. Carter and I will take you with us. We need you, anyway."

The boy stared at Malet; his eyes bulged and his jaw dropped in amazement.

"Mister who?" he panted. "Look-a-here! I don't want any stuffed propositions handed out to me, and maybe I didn't understand you just right. Did you say Mr. Carter?"

"I did," replied Malet, smiling and winking at Nick.

"Well, about a minute ago you called him Nick. Was that straight goods, too?"

"Sure thing," replied Malet, who understood the mingled surprise, pleasure and unbelief that was working in the mind of the boy.

"Well, if you put the two names together, that would make Nick Carter, wouldn't it?"

"Naturally, it would."

"Are you giving it to me straight, Mr. Malet? I know that's your name, because the lady said so; but this other business—is that straight?"

"Straight from the shoulder, my lad."

The boy turned slowly and faced Nick again. His face was flushed and his eyes were as bright as stars, and in spite of the calmness he tried to assume, his voice trembled.

"Are you—Nick Carter?" he asked, slowly.

"Yes, my boy, I am Nick Carter," replied Nick, kindly.

"I mean 'the' Nick Carter—the real, all-wool-and-a-yard-wide, dyed-in-the-warp article, who has Chick and Patsy for assistants—are you 'that' Nick Carter?"

"Yes."

"Gee whizz!"

For a moment his bright eyes seemed to devour the detective, and then he turned them away for a time. But presently he returned to the subject.

"I never expected to do it," he said to himself, more than to his companions.

"To do what?" asked Nick.

"To meet you, sir; least of all to do you a service. Hully gee! Say! Please take back these five rubles,

will you? I'd never respect myself again as long as I live if I accepted them for what I have done."

Nick received the rubles without a word, for he saw that the boy meant what he said, and that his feelings would really be wounded if he were forced to keep the money.

"Thank you, sir," he said, quietly, when Nick took the money. "Now, sir, will you do me a very, very great favor?"

"I think so; what is it?"

"Will you shake hands with me—just once?"

"Will I? Why, certainly. I really think that I should have asked you to shake hands with me, for you have done me a very great service to-day."

"Have I? Gosh! Say, Mr. Carter. I'd rather hear you say that than to fall heir to a million dollars. I would, by jingo! This is the proudest day of my life."

Then, suddenly, his voice changed and became pathetic, and he turned again to Malet.

"Say," he said, "you—you ain't stringing me, are you?"

"Not a bit!" said Malet, laughing. "Nary a string, sonny. It's all straight from the shoulder, just the way you like to talk United States."

"I believe you—I do, honest. Just for a minute I thought maybe you might be trying to have some fun with me, but now I see it's all right. Mr. Carter, you can have my trunk! It's true that it's in New York, and there ain't much in it, but you know when I say my trunk I really mean my body—head and shoulders, and my heart's in that, you know. It's yours, to do with as you see fit, and if you want to make me the happiest kid on earth you'll just let me be of some kind of service to you. I don't care what it is. I don't want any pay—at first—'cause I can scrape a living, the same as I've been doing, and you haven't got any call to pay me anything until you find that I'm worth something; but if you'll just tell me to drink up the ocean, pull down the stars or do something simple I'll make a bluff at doing it that will look mighty like success to some folks. I think I could lick the czar's whole army if you asked me to do it for you."

CHAPTER II.

A LITTLE GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK.

"Now let us hear something about you," said Nick Carter to the boy, when they were seated in a private office at Malet's headquarters. "But, first, did you see the lady who threw the note out to you, or did you only hear her?"

"I saw her face."

"Describe her. I merely want to be sure of the identity."

"Well, sir, there ain't much to describe as I can see. All you've got to do is just to imagine that you are looking into the prettiest pair of eyes on top of the earth, and you'll get an idea of what hers are. Her hair? Well, if you should take that old bronze statue of Peter, that stands up here in the square, and polish it, and then let the moon shine on it—not the sun, mind you; but the moon—it would be just about the color of her hair; and her voice, when she spoke to me—say, did you ever hear a voice that sort of put out feelers and wound 'em around you, when you heard it? That's the way her voice sounded. Gee! but she is a pretty woman, and no mistake."

Nick smiled indulgently, and Malet cocked his head to one side and remarked:

"By the powers, kid, when you get a few more years on your shoulders, you'll be doing one of two things, I'm thinking. You'll be writing poetry or you'll be languishing in prison for breaking into a convent. Sure, he's described her, all right, Nick. I couldn't have done it any better myself."

"What's your name?" asked Nick.

The boy grinned.

"Well, sir," he said, "the one I left at home for safe-keeping while I was away is Philip Pommery. Down around the City Hall in New York, where I used to be pretty well known among the kids, they used to call me Pommery Sec, because, they said, I was always dry in the way I said things to them; but the name was too long for them, and so I'm generally known by the name of 'Fiz.'"

Malet slapped his knee.

"Sure, that's a good one," he said. "Philip Pommery—Pommery Sec—Fill-up Fiz."

"When did you leave home?" asked Nick of the boy.

"About a year ago."

"Have you been here ever since?"

"No, indeed. I've been here about three months. You see, sir, I started out to make my way around the world. I bet with one of the fellows that I could do it inside of three years."

"And you have got this far on your way, eh?"

"I'm two-thirds of the way. I started west."

"I see. How old are you?"

"Well, sir, I suppose I'm almost eighteen, although everybody tells me that I look about sixteen; but then, you see, I was raised on the street in New York, and that sort of life puts an edge onto a youngster like me."

"You talk pretty well; have you been to school?"

"Night school, some. But since then I've tried to pick up books that would teach me something."

"You say you were traveling around the world on a bet?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was the wager?"

"A dinner at the Waldorf."

"What?"

"That's right, sir. Nothing less."

"But the proprietor would not let either of you inside to eat it."

"Wouldn't he, though? I'd like to see him keep me outside if I had the price."

"I believe you said that you would like to serve me, Philip?"

"Yes, sir," eagerly.

"Well, since your direction lies toward the west, if you will serve under my orders until I get ready to leave St. Petersburg, I will take you with me as far as Paris, and I'll start you from there on your way to win your dinner at the Waldorf. Now, you need not reply, for I know you will accept."

"All right, sir, just tell me what to do and I will do it."

"I want you to go back to the house where you received that note you brought to me."

"Yes, sir."

"Loiter around the front of it in sight from the window where you saw the lady, and keep in sight of it so that if she happens to look out of it again she will see you and perhaps recognize you."

"I can do that."

"Make signs to her, and try to get a word with her if you can do so without being observed; but you must be careful not to get caught."

"I won't get caught. I'm too fly for that. And I don't think I'll be noticed, either. Besides, I shouldn't wonder if I might work my way into the house, somehow. You see, I'm so little that folks will swallow most any story I tell 'em. Excuse me, sir; what else?"

"If you can find a way to speak with her, let her know that you delivered the note in time, so that I did not take the train. Assure her that I am still here, and that some time to-night, if she is in any immediate danger, Mr. Malet and I will rescue her; but, my lad, you must not use either my name or Mr. Malet's. You can refer to me as Mr. Parsons when you talk with her. She will know whom you refer to. Speak of Malet as my friend. That will be enough."

"Yes, sir."

"If you cannot get near enough to her to talk, make signs to her to write another note to me and to throw it out of the window where you can get it."

"I can do that, too."

"That will do for now. I'll leave everything else to your own sagacity. It is almost eleven o'clock now. I want you to get back here before dark; that will give you about five hours in which to work. Mr. Malet will take you downstairs now and give you something to eat. After that, lose no time and return here the moment you have anything to report."

When Fiz, as he delighted to be called, had left the office and Malet was back again in the room with Nick, the latter had already changed his appearance, and was prepared to go out himself.

"Now, Malet," he said, "I want you to return to your duties at the palace as if nothing had happened, and to act as if I had really started for Paris on that train. Of course, your remarkable police know mighty well that

I haven't started; they know exactly where I am, and they intend, if they can do so, to keep an eye on me till I leave town."

"Exactly. And for that very reason the disguise you have on will do you no good when you step outside the door. You would be followed even if you were disguised so that you bore no resemblance to a man at all. Everybody and everything that leaves this part of the building while you are supposed to be here will be followed, and there will still be enough watchers left to track down a dozen others."

"I know that perfectly well."

"Then why that disguise?"

"I'm going to fool them."

Malet shook his head incredulously.

"They're a hard proposition to fool, Nick."

"Perhaps. It is not likely that any of the spies will follow you if you go out alone, is it?"

"No."

"Well, I noticed a disguise exactly like this one in your office in the little house under the palace walls."

"Yes; there is one there."

"Very good. Get your man, Boris, to put it on. When he is dressed send him to the Telskoy market and have him take a seat on one of the rolls of rugs in the carpet corner. He has merely to sit there two hours, then to rise and return to his duty. I will do the rest."

"You mean to walk past him and to drop, or change your disguise the moment you have done so."

"Exactly."

"So that when the men who follow you come upon him, they will think you have seated yourself to rest, and they will rest also."

"Just that. When Boris rises and walks away they will follow him. Presently they will discover that he is Boris, and then they will wonder how they made such a mistake. But in the meantime I will be unmolested."

"Good. All right. I'll have Boris there in just half an hour."

"And in forty minutes from now I will walk past him."

Nick watched through one of the windows when

Malet left the house, and he saw that although a spy or two appeared from convenient places of shelter and made as if to follow him, that they decided not to do so.

Then, when the time was up, he started out himself.

He had no sooner placed his feet upon the pavement of the street than two men took up the trail after him, and he had no doubt that another—perhaps two others—were keeping them in view. So thorough is the system of espionage in Russia that even the spies are spied upon, and no man in all the country can say with truth that there is ever a time when he knows that he is not watched.

Nick hurried at once toward the Telskoy market, where he found that Boris had already arrived.

The spot where Nick had directed that he take his seat was in a sheltered nook so situated that the men who were shadowing him could not see the spot until they arrived quite close to it.

When Nick turned into view of the place where Boris was seated, he was, therefore, for a moment out of sight of his pursuers, and in that moment he worked wonders.

One motion of his right hand rid him of hat, wig, whiskers and goggles. Another replaced the wig with one of darker hue, and also adjusted a black mustache and imperial. A quick stroke darkened his brows, and a different hat was substituted for the one he had worn. The wide, adjustable collar and cuffs which had decorated the coat he wore, were unbuttoned and thrust into his pockets, and when the pursuing spies turned into the aisle toward him, he coolly walked past them and left them staring at Boris, and no doubt wondering why he had so suddenly experienced fatigue.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNFINISHED LETTER.

Nick did not wait to know how long a time Boris remained seated on the roll of rugs, or whether the spies who had followed him from Malet's house continued on the watch; he had freed himself from espionage, which was all that he desired of the disguise, and the instant he was free from the market place he hurried in the

direction of the neighborhood where he had sent Philip Pommery.

As a matter of fact, the detective was greatly pleased about his encounter with the New York boy, who had shown himself to be so unusually bright.

Throughout Nick Carter's experiences, his assistants had always come to him in just that way, and while he was hurrying along toward the suburban residence of the grand duke, it was recalled to him that it was in just such manner that he first encountered the present writer of these records, Chick, among the mountains of Nevada, and that it was also much the same as the beginning of his acquaintance with Patsy.

"This lad, Philip, is a bright one," he thought, "and I shouldn't wonder a bit if he is just the lad I am seeking. I'll give him a good trial, at least."

Having made several turns and perceiving that he was not spied upon or suspected for other than what he appeared to be, Nick at last hailed a cab and directed that he be driven to the corner of two streets which he knew was quite near to his destination.

Arrived there, he descended, dismissed the cab and walked slowly along in the direction of the house.

His appearance now, it must be remembered, was not at all like that in which he had departed from the home of Malet; and, on the other hand, it was not at all as Philip Pommery had seen him at the station; neither was it like anything he had assumed before while in the city of St. Petersburg.

And yet it was a thorough disguise, for all that. He appeared to be merely an ordinary pedestrian who looked more like a Frenchman than a Russian; and inasmuch as the time was shortly after the treaty of alliance between Russia and France had been signed, there were many more Frenchmen than usual in the Russian capital, and they also enjoyed much greater liberties than were accorded to representatives of other nations.

The house in which Philip Pommery had indicated in his description to Nick and Malet was one which was not unfamiliar to the detective. He had, in fact, already visited it twice, so that he was perfectly familiar with its interior plan, as well as with its surroundings. The one point which he did not and could not under-

stand was how the Countess de Tierney, who was the Yvonne of the note which Philip had brought to him at the station, could so quickly have fallen again into the power of her enemy; or how she had been spirited away to this house, apparently in the broad light of day.

The facts of the case, in a word, were these:

Yvonne de Tierney's sister, who was the Princess Stevanislaus, had been found, foully murdered in a room in the palace, and Yvonne, who was suspected by the Russian Government, of being a Nihilist, had crossed the borders of the empire in defiance of the czar's threat to send her to Siberia if she again entered Russia. This she had done, ostensibly, in order to be present at the funeral of her sister. In reality, there were personal reasons for her daring act, which she had not disclosed. When Nick Carter, in aiding his friend, Malet, solved the mystery of the crime behind the throne, he had also saved Yvonne from the power of the grand duke, and by threatening to disclose the secrets of the office of the dreaded Third Section, which he had discovered, he had forced the duke to consent that Yvonne should remain to attend the funeral of her sister, and that she should be permitted to depart from Russia unmolested.

He had been so convinced of his power over the grand duke, by reasons of those secrets of the Third Section, and was so sure of the effect of his threat upon the duke, that he had not hesitated to start at once upon his return, leaving the young and beautiful woman in the care of Malet.

But we have already seen what happened.

His foot was actually upon the step of the coach—the coach itself was actually in motion when Philip brought him the note from Yvonne.

* * * * *

When Nick, after leaving the carriage, turned the corner of the street and came in sight of the house from which the note had been sent to him, he discovered Philip in the very act of receiving a second one.

"Evidently," he thought, "the boy has carried out my instructions to some purpose. He has already made

his presence known to Yvonne and she has managed to respond."

He drew back out of sight again and waited, and in another moment Philip turned away and started in his direction.

He had not taken a dozen steps in his flight when Nick discovered the reason for his impetuous haste, for a man darted from the gate in the garden wall and bounded in pursuit of him.

It was a moment in which Nick was obliged to think quickly, and in an instant he had decided how he could stop the boy long enough to possess himself of the note, and then to permit Philip to escape while he intercepted his pursuer.

In running to make his escape, the lad dashed directly toward the detective, and barely three seconds elapsed before he was within reaching distance. Then it was that Nick, who until that instant had apparently seen nothing of what was taking place, threw himself suddenly before the flying lad and seized him in his arms.

As he seized him, he pinned his arms to his sides, and at the same instant told him quickly who he was.

"Keep cool, Fiz," he said, using the street nickname of the boy by way of more quickly reassuring him. "I am Nick Carter. Give me the note. Wait around the next corner for me. I'll get rid of this chap."

In an instant the note was pressed into his hand, the boy was released and ran on, and the detective was face to face with the pursuer.

"Out of the way!" cried the man, in Russian. "Why didn't you hold him when you had him? I ordered you——"

That was all he had an opportunity to say, for Nick Carter's foot had tripped him dexterously, and with a curse the man pitched forward against the pavement on his face and hands.

Instantly Nick was all solicitude, and in hastening forward to assist the man to rise, and while making profuse apologies, he managed, in spite of the fellow's struggles, to detain him long enough so that the boy was out of sight, and so that there appeared to be no sort of use in continuing the chase—and the detect-

ive managed so adroitly that he actually convinced the fallen man that it was all a mistake.

"You see, sir," he said, "I am very, very near-sighted. When I believed I was getting out of your way, I really got directly into it. If you had not spoken, I think I would have avoided you, but the sound of your steps and the sound of your voice at the same time, confused me so that I blundered. I hope you are not hurt?"

"No, confound it; but the boy got away from me."

"Indeed! Was it the same boy who ran into me?"

"Yes."

"Why were you chasing him?"

"Because he stole something."

"Ah! Indeed! What a pity! And he has escaped?"

"Yes."

"And it is my fault. I am very sorry."

"Oh, well, never mind. It is no matter, now. He has gone. Let him go. Good-day, sir."

The man turned, and, hastening along the street, re-entered the gateway in the wall and disappeared, and Nick watched him till the gate was closed.

"Takes it wonderfully easy," mused the detective. "Almost too easy to be real. I wonder what the game is, anyway. Upon my word, it looks almost as if he intended to let the boy escape all the while."

He walked on past the house and turned a corner, intending to make a circuit before again encountering Philip.

"That chap was no servant," he mused. "He was one of the duke's retainers; one who knows the secrets of this little private house of his, and for some reason or other, I cannot get it out of my head that the chase after the boy was all a fake. Well, here is the lad, anyway, and I will soon know the contents of that note. Perhaps that will tell me something."

The streets were deserted in every direction, and the detective was satisfied that they were not watched; nevertheless, he motioned to Philip to follow him into a narrow alley that ran through one of the squares, and there they soon found a spot where they could converse without the danger of being observed by others.

Before discussing the matter with Philip, Nick rapidly ran his eyes over the note, and this is what he read:

"I write this in great haste and without any surety that it will ever reach you. I may be discovered while I write it, and hence I do not use your name. Our enemy has not kept faith with you or with me. Already I am in his power, although he does not know that I am aware of the fact. There has been no outward manifestation, but I know this. Every servant who might stand as my friend has been withdrawn. Every officer sent here from the palace by Malet has disappeared. Those who have taken the places thus vacated, are, I know, in the service of the duke. I have taken my last look at my sister, and the casket has been finally sealed. It may be that I will be permitted to attend the services to be held this evening, but I have a premonition that something will happen to prevent me. It may be that all my fears are groundless, but I cannot rid myself of the feeling that I am in the power of my worst enemy and that I have much to fear. Do not think me foolish or timid, but, oh, sir, if I could prevail upon you to wait over in St. Petersburg one day more——"

The letter stopped abruptly at that point.

There had not been a word of explanation added to it.

It was the end of the document.

Nick raised his eyes and fixed them keenly upon the lad beside him.

"Boy," he said, "I wonder if you have got any of the detective instinct in you."

"Betcher life I have, sir," was the quick response.

"Good. I'll give you a trial, and we'll see whether you have or not. Read that note and tell me what you think of it. After you have done that, I'll ask you a few questions; but I want your opinion before you hear mine, for I don't yet know what has happened to you since you left me at Malet's office two hours ago."

CHAPTER IV.

THE VALUE OF BEING NICK CARTER'S FRIEND

Fiz read the note through to the end, and presently returned it to Nick with the remark:

"I think, sir, that this was written before the other one—the one I delivered to you at the station."

"Good. So do I. Now tell me about the manner of your receiving this one."

"There isn't much to tell. I did as you directed, but I must have passed the house half a dozen times before there was any sign that I was seen."

"Did you make any effort to get inside?"

"Sure I did; but it wasn't any use. I bought a package of stuff for six coppers at the chemists, and tried to deliver it there; but it was no use. They wouldn't let me in; and, anyhow, I figured that if I did get inside, I wouldn't stand any chance of getting next to her, so I gave it up and did the outside act."

"Well?"

"Well, after a while she must have got a line on me, for I heard a sharp tapping at the window—the same one where I saw her sweet face before I went to you at the station."

"Did you see her face this time?"

"Well, sir, I can't say that I did, and I can't say that I didn't. I saw somebody, and that somebody was a woman, but I couldn't swear it was her."

"What did you see?"

"When I heard the tapping on the window, I turned and looked back, for I had gone some distance beyond it at the time. When I turned, I saw the window go about halfway up, stop there a minute, and then drop again—and that's all I did see."

"What did you do then?"

"Why, I just naturally concluded that she had been at the point of raising the window to say something to me when she had been interrupted, so I went on as if nothing had happened, and after a while I turned and went back again. This time, when I got directly under the window, I looked up, and then, for just an instant, I saw a face that I thought was hers—only, as I say, I couldn't swear to it. However, she motioned to me to stop, then the window was raised again and that note was thrown out. I reckon you saw what happened after that."

"Yes. Now, my lad, what is your deduction after all that has happened?"

"Well, sir, I hope you won't think I'm too fresh if I tell you exactly what I do think."

"Certainly not. That is precisely what I want you to do."

"Well, I think one of two things."

"What are they?"

"Either she ain't there at all—that they have got onto her game and done this to blind us, and we are barking up a tree after a bird that has flown out of it—or that she is there and that this note was written before the other one; that when she did send the other one she didn't have this here one handy to send, and that now she meant to add something more to it, but was interrupted and didn't have a chance. That is all that I can make out of it."

"It is about all that anybody could make out of it," said Nick. "You have done very well in your figuring. Now tell me which opinion you favor. Is the woman there, or isn't she?"

"Well, sir, I'll give it up. I'm inclined to think she is there. I'm certain that she was when she sent you the first note, because I saw her, and you recognized the description I gave of her. If she was there then, it is more than likely that she is there now."

"You are right, Philip."

"Would you mind calling me Fizz, when we are alone? It ain't much of a name, and it don't mean anything, as I know of, but it reminds me of home, somehow, and I used to think if some day the great Nick Carter should walk up and slap me on the back and say, 'Hello, Fizz!' that I wouldn't change places with the President of the United States."

For reply Nick raised his hand and brought it down on the lad's shoulder with a whack that knocked the breath almost out of his body and sent him whirling up against the wall; and, as the blow fell, remarked with a smile:

"Hello, Fizz! How do you like that?"

"Geewhillikins!" exclaimed Fizz, as he separated himself from the wall and returned to Nick's side; and then he stood still and looked up into the face of the one man on earth whom he adored and respected, and there was a grin of perfect content upon his face.

"That settles it," he said. "I'm made now. I've been born and baptised into a new world this minute. I'm yours from this out, and if I am a sort of effervescent cuss, you'll find that I won't pop out any corks unless you press the button. Now, sir, would you mind telling me what I am to do next?"

"You are to remain in this neighborhood until you see me again, or until I send you word to leave it."

"I can do that all right."

"Keep that house under your eye all the time. Don't let anybody enter or leave it without your knowledge, and be prepared to tell me as nearly as you can about everybody who does go in or come out."

"I can do that, too."

"Don't be seen yourself if you can help it, and if you are seen, don't get caught. If it gets altogether too hot for you around here, why it will be better for you to leave your post, and, in that case—do you know the little house under the palace wall?"

"You bet I do! The little house what the lads around here say is haunted. Yep. I know it all right."

"Well, if you do have to leave here before you hear from me or see me, go there, go inside, and wait there till I come. Here is a key. I have a duplicate. If you go there, and while you are waiting for me anybody else should visit the little house——"

"I'll crawl under something and hide, and wait till you arrive."

"All right," said Nick, smiling. "Malet is the only person likely to appear there, except myself, but there are others who have keys, as I have discovered of late. Be on your guard."

"You bet I will, sir."

"If I should have occasion to send word to you at any time, you will know it is from me by finding the word 'fiz' somewhere in the body of the message."

Nick bowed then without another word, and hurried away.

The lad watched him depart with feelings of the utmost elation.

He had never in all his life expected to be as happy as he was at that moment. He felt that he had leaped into life with one bound. He had been accepted as

a friend and assistant by the greatest detective in all the world—Nick Carter. Nick Carter had slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Hello, Fiz!" Nick Carter had reposed confidence in him; he had shaken him by the hand and had looked into his eyes as though he liked him, and Nick Carter had left him on guard with important duties to perform—well!

It is safe to say that if the Czar of all the Russias had stepped down from his throne at that moment and offered it to Philip Pommery in exchange for the friendship of Nick Carter, the lad would have stepped back and replied:

"Not on your life, mister! I'm Nick Carter's friend, and an emperor ain't a two-spot alongside of him, he ain't!"

Philip was a remarkable boy in his way, too, as will presently be seen. He had no idea of his parentage, and his earliest recollection was of the streets of New York. He could not remember a time when he had not scratched for his living, as he expressed it. His wits had been sharpened in a surprising manner during the years that he had rolled about in the city gutters, fighting his way with his fists and voice, teeth and arms and legs and wits from his very babyhood.

Even the name of Pommery was one that he had selected himself. He had heard it used once in connection with a case of wine that had dropped from a cart and been broken on the street, and, liking the sound of it, he had adopted it; and Philip—well, somehow that had always belonged to him; he didn't know how or why, save that it had. And so he became Philip Pommery.

When Nick left him he started down the alley again toward the house he was to watch, and discovered that he could readily observe it from the mouth of the alleyway.

For more than an hour he remained almost immovable, with his eyes fixed upon the windows and the two entrances, both of which were visible from where he was seated, and during that time there was not a sign of life discoverable about the place.

But just as the sun was going down—just at that time of the day when, in St. Petersburg, it cannot be

said to be either light or dark, a closed carriage turned a nearby corner and halted before the main entrance.

Philip started a little forward, expectantly, in order to obtain a clearer view, and then as hastily drew back again out of sight, for the man who descended from the carriage had turned full toward him, and had his eyes happened to wander in the direction of the alley, must have discovered him.

But the boy convinced himself that he had not been seen, for the man did not appear to devote a second glance in his direction. He turned almost instantly when he descended from the carriage, and holding out his hand, assisted another, a veiled woman, to alight. Then the two entered the house together while the carriage waited at the door.

The man Philip recognized, for it was the grand duke.

A few moments later two men came out of the house together. They passed up another avenue and were soon lost to view. Then, presently, two more came out, and they walked down the street to the avenue below where Philip was concealed, and also passed from his sight. Then two more men came out of the house and entered the waiting carriage.

"Geel!" murmured Philip. "I didn't suppose they had a full brigade in there. I wonder if there are any more where they came from."

The carriage started away from the curb, turned and came directly toward the spot where he was waiting and watching; but it did not occur to him that the occupants were after him until the vehicle drew up suddenly and came to a full stop directly in front of the alley.

The instant it stopped, the doors on either side flew open, and the two men leaped out.

Then, and not till then, Philip discovered that they were after him.

One of them ran around the horses' heads and the other came straight at him from the carriage, so that instantly Philip discovered that they had him surrounded, so to speak; particularly as the driver leaped to the ground and braced his head and shoulders in the only avenue that offered any possibility of escape.

"Geel!" exclaimed Philip. "I'm up against it this time, for fair! Through the alley is my play, I reckon."

He turned as the men approached him and darted up the alley, but he had not gone twenty feet before he saw that others were approaching him from the other end of it.

In a flash, then, it came upon him what the departure of so many men from the house had really meant.

The grand duke had seen the boy in hiding in the alley; he had entered the house and given directions that the lad must be captured; the men had left it in twos, so it was safe to say that at least two of them were coming down the alley from the other end, that two more were guarding the end in case he should succeed in getting past the first two, and behind him were three more, all bent upon his capture.

On either side of him was a high wall, the tops of which were far beyond his reach, and the alley itself was not more than six feet in width.

"This looks to me like a bottle with a neck at both ends, and both of 'em corked up to beat the band!" he muttered.

For an instant it seemed as if there was absolutely no means of escape—as if there was nothing for him to do but to give up gracefully, hold out his hands and permit himself to be captured and led back in triumph to the house he had been watching; and, in that instant, the lines were drawing tighter and tighter around him.

He was still running away from the men at his end of the alley and toward the men at the other end, and as he had run faster than the men who were pursuing him, who, in fact, were walking now that they had their prize bottled up in the alley, he was about midway between the two parties and fifty yards from either, when he discovered, lying upon the stone flagging at one side of the alley, a long, slender, but strong-looking pole.

Instantly he leaped upon it and seized it in his hands.

It was of hard wood, and, therefore, heavy; a first class polished and seasoned by long exposure to the air; in fact, it was as good a pole as a lamplighter would delight in, to use for propping up her lines when they

were heavy with freshly-rinsed clothes—and it was fully ten feet long.

A person thinks quickly when in a predicament like that which confronted Philip Pommery at that moment. He thought quickly, and without stopping to count the

The pole was there, ten feet long.

The walls were on either side of him, ten feet or more in height.

In front of him and behind him were men, who had now ceased to run, but who were, nevertheless, approaching, although leisurely, to make him captive, and to take him away, he knew not to what fate; although, to do the lad justice, it was not of his own fate that he thought at that moment, but of the possible failure on his part to carry out the wishes of Nick Carter.

Philip had passed one summer of his career in the capacity of messenger boy around the training quarters of a pugilist, and among the many acquirements of that time was pole-vaulting, and that is what the presence of the pole meant to him when he espied it.

He darted for it like the tongue of a toad darting for a fly.

For a moment he held it poised in his hands, measuring the distance he would have to run, the height of the wall, and the possibility of the success of his desperate effort.

The thought that flashed through him in that instant was:

"If I can run up that pole, hand over hand, two or three feet while it is in the air, maybe I can throw myself over the wall. If I don't throw myself over it, I can at least throw myself against the top of it. If I do that, it's more than likely that I'll break a rib, but—well, those ducks will have to come to the other side of the wall to get me, anyhow. I shan't wait here for 'em."

Then he started forward with a rush.

The men, seeing him stop and seize the pole, and then hesitate with it in his grasp, and then appear to move toward them, halted in amazement.

The two upon whom he appeared to charge, looked themselves for the attack, for the lad did not look friend-

able with the strange weapon in his grasp, dashing toward them like a madman.

But when he was still thirty feet distant from them, they saw him slant the end of the pole against a tuft of grass that protruded through the flagging, and then they saw him rise like a rocket in the air, and as the pole rose in the air, the boy seemed to run up it with his hands, like a squirrel. Then, of a sudden, he released his hold, the pole fell at their feet, and the boy they had been pursuing, disappeared over the top of the wall.

CHAPTER V.

THE GRAND DUKE'S PLOT.

Our young friend—whom at time we must refer to by the name he loved best, Fiz—like the proverbial cat, landed on his feet. More than that, he landed where the ground was soft and yielding, so that his feet, coming in contact with it, made no sound—and what was of still greater importance, he found himself within easy reach of the lower sill of an open window of the house which the wall he had leaped over surrounded.

One hasty glance around convinced himself that the only way of escape from that garden was through the house; and, plainly, the only way through that house—for him—was by way of the open window, and he did not hesitate.

Two quick leaps took him within reach of the window. Another, and he grasped the sill and drew himself up.

Then he swung himself astride of it, lifted his other leg inside the room, stepped inside, and, before the men in the alley had recovered from their surprise at his sudden disappearance before their eyes, he had closed down the window and fastened it.

Then he looked around him.

Already night was falling and there was very little light in the room, but there was sufficient for him to discover that he was in a library, and to realize that he had penetrated into the household of people of quality.

The window by which he had entered was heavily

curtained. Brocaded draperies hung from a gilded cornice above it, and, instantly deciding that there could be found no better place for immediate concealment than among the draperies of that very window, he stepped back among them and effectually lost himself in their folds.

From where he stood, however, he could dimly see the top of the wall over which he had vaulted, and soon he smiled when he saw the form of one of his pursuers appear on the top, and, after addressing those he had left on the other side, sit there placidly, waiting and watching.

Then, after a few moments, the figures of the other pursuers appeared in the garden, and until it was too dark for him to see anything, he could watch their frantic efforts to get some trace of him among the shrubbery.

Even after that, lights were brought and the garden was searched again, thoroughly, from end to end; then the men and the lights disappeared and everything became quiet.

"It's about time I was getting back to my duty," muttered Philip. "I was told to watch that house, and this isn't doing it a little bit! I wonder now, if I'd better try to get back over that wall, or to work my way out through the house? Huh! I reckon the house is the safer of the two."

He stepped out from behind the curtain and had taken a step forward in the direction of the door, when he leaped as suddenly back again, for it was suddenly thrown open, a flood of light entered the room, and with it came two men, one of whom the lad instantly recognized as the grand duke himself.

They were talking together in Russian, but every word of their conversation was intelligible to Philip.

"It rather interferes with our plans to have that boy get away, Steven," the grand duke was saying. "But we will get him later on. I want the whole crew. I don't want one of them left out."

"We will easily capture him before morning, your highness," replied the other man with a deprecating and reassuring gesture.

"I'm not so sure of that. You thought you had him

in the alley, but he got away, and where he could have gone to after he entered this garden is more than I can guess."

"He doubtless got over the wall again before I succeeded in gaining the top of it. He was most agile."

"Agile!" The grand duke threw back his head and laughed. Then changing his tone, he added, severely: "Take my advice and find him, Steven. I shall hear chains clanking every time you walk past me, and smell dungeons every time you are near me, until you have that boy. If only Nick Carter walks into our little trap, to-night, and if Sacha Orloff wins his freedom in the only way he can do it—— Bah! Bring Orloff here. I will give him his orders myself. You have gotten into the way of failing me of late. I am getting so that I do not trust you, Steven. Bring Orloff here."

The man who was called Steven shuddered apprehensively and left the room, but in a moment returned with another man, whose hands were chained behind him and whose feet were shackled so that he could only walk with short, mincing steps.

The grand duke dropped into a chair and regarded the prisoner with a quizzical smile.

"Orloff," he said, presently, "you have the face of a saint, but I am told you have the disposition of a fiend. Your trade is murder, isn't it?"

"I would gladly kill you if I had the chance," was the calm reply.

"Ho! ho! no doubt. There are others like you, Orloff. You have lately committed two murders for which you are to be executed—eh, Orloff?"

"Such seems to be my present predicament."

"Orloff, if, on the condition that you made me a certain promise, I should arrange so that you would be permitted to escape, would you keep that promise? I have heard that you have the reputation of being a man of your word as well as a man devoid of emotion. Answer me the question."

"Yes, I would keep my promise to you—if I made one."

"Bah! Is there any promise you would not make in order to save your own life?"

"Yes, two."

"So? What are they?"

"I have sworn, if I live, some day to take the czar's life, and—yours."

"Ho! ho! ho! Oh, well, I shall not stand between you and Nicholas; as for myself, I'll take my chances against you, Orloff. But there is a man whom I want you to kill—and at once. Will you kill him for me?"

"Who?"

"Malet."

"Yes," calmly replied Orloff, "I will kill Malet gladly."

"Good. Give me your word that Malet shall die by your hand before he is twenty-four hours older, no matter what the consequences to yourself may be, and I will see to it that you will walk unmolested out of your prison to-night."

"It is too soon. Give me forty-eight hours, and I will agree."

"Forty-eight it is. Take him away, Steven. You may kill me when you like, if you can do it, Orloff, only don't make the attempt till after you have finished off Malet."

"There is another whom I desire to kill, and at once," said Orloff.

"Only one? Who is it?"

"That man whom you call Nicholas Carter. The man who betrayed me and captured me! The man who fooled me! Who held out a promise of revenge to me, and then—Bah! I would kill him if I could."

"H'm! Well, if you happen to run across him, I haven't any objection, only I have an idea that he will be dead before you get those chains off you. He is going to visit a certain house to-night, that is not far away from here, for the purpose of rescuing a fair lady from awful peril. We shall be awaiting his arrival, and when he comes, I'm going to shut him up for an hour or so with a pet of mine. You have heard of my pet, haven't you, Orloff?"

"Yes. I have heard of it."

"My lady love can squeeze so tightly as he can, Orloff. If you fail me in the promise you have made me, I should capture you again. I will give you to my pet. He has digested more than one man since I have

owned him. Go, now. Don't disturb yourself about Nick Carter. In a few hours he will be looking into the brightest pair of eyes that ever gleamed; a little later his bones will crack like pipe stems; and later still, he will be buried in a grave which might excite the envy of an artist. Go!"

Philip, in his place of concealment, shuddered in spite of himself.

No one, listening to the remarks of the grand duke, could fail to comprehend the awful significance of his suggestion; and everybody knew that somewhere in St. Petersburg he kept a collection of pets which were calculated to fill the average mind with horror at the mere thought of them.

Even Philip had heard about the grand duke's snakes. Even the boys, with whom he had companioned since his arrival in the Russian city talked about the grand duke's hobby, and of the wonderful python he owned, said to be not only the largest snake ever held in captivity, but the largest that was ever known to exist.

Somewhere among the many houses owned by the duke rumor said that he had converted an entire floor into a veritable jungle home for his reptiles, and that, in the huge room, fitted with palms and tropical vegetation, the sunlight shone through a large glass dome, and covered steam pipes converted the atmosphere into a genuine paradise for his pets.

Philip had heard these stories, and now he had heard the duke's reference to his own intentions regarding Nick Carter. Naturally there was only one conclusion for him, which was that a plot had been arranged whereby the detective was to be captured and given to the python.

The man, Steven, left the room with Orloff, and the duke, thus left alone, walked several times up and down the length of the apartment with his hands behind him and his head bowed in thought.

Unfortunately for Philip, he was not one who did his thinking aloud, as characters in novels so frequently do, for the benefit of a listening hero. Whatever the duke's thoughts were, he kept them to himself; but it was evident that they concerned the lady who had so skillfully escaped from his man, for presently he ap-

proached the very window where Philip was concealed behind the draperies, and, placing one hand against the glass to shade his eyes, peered out into the darkness.

It was a terrible moment for Philip.

He did not dare to move, and the duke's arm almost touched him.

The mere raising of his hand would have betrayed the boy; but he held his breath and stood like a statue through a minute which seemed like a week; and then the duke calmly turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Geewhizz!" said Philip, to himself. "That's the closest I hope I'll ever come to being food for a lot of snakes. And that reminds me that I haven't got any time to spare. I must get out of here, and there is only one way to do it; just one way, and I'm going to try it. In order to leave this house, I've got to walk out of the front door, like anybody else would do, and that is what Pommery is going to do now."

CHAPTER VI.

A PRINCESS OF THE BLOOD—THE DETECTIVE'S BRAVERY.

When Nick Carter left Philip in the alleyway, watching the house of the grand duke, where Yvonne de Tierney was supposed to be a prisoner, he hastened at once to the palace and there sought Malet.

"Come along with me," he said. "I have something to show you. Do you remember that I told you about the papers I concealed beneath a stone in the floor of your office in the little house under the palace wall?"

"Certainly."

"Very well. I want to show you those papers. We have about an hour, and then we will go to the house of the grand duke. Have you made inquiries about the disappearance of Yvonne?"

"Sure."

"Well?"

"She has disappeared, that's all. Not a trace of her can be found anywhere; but, Nick, there is one funny thing about it all. She had not disappeared at the time you received the first note from her, or, if she had,

my men are at fault. They claim that it was fully an hour after that when she got into a carriage to be driven to the house of Mme. Gourki, at which place she never arrived."

"Where is Mme. Gourki's house?"

"Within a stone's throw of the house of the grand duke, where we suppose her to be now. Mme. Gourki is not at home—is not, in fact, in the city, and has not been here for a month. Her house has been closed and in the charge of servants. Yvonne could not have gone there at all, for nobody has arrived or departed from that house to-day. At least that is the report of my men."

"I think I understand the case now," replied Nick. "Mme. Gourki's house is almost opposite the grand duke's villa, isn't it? And Mme. Gourki is a relative of the Stevanislaus family. Yvonne, not knowing that the madam was out of the city, has asked to be taken there, or she has been made to believe that the madam sent for her. The duke's carriage was sent to take her away, and it conveyed her to the other house. The discrepancy in time can easily be accounted for by a mistake of your men, and little mistakes like that are sometimes valuable. There is just one thing certain in this business, and that is that Yvonne is in the power of her enemies, and I'm going to get her out of it. But first, Malet, I have got something I wish to show you. Come."

Readers of foregoing numbers of the Nick Carter adventures will remember the little house under the palace wall, and also that there were secret passages to it from many parts of the palace. The two detectives made their way there through one of these, a passage which leads from the room behind the throne, and, presently, they were seated together in the little private office which Malet kept there.

Presently Nick counted eight of the square stones of the flooring, beginning at the north end of the room, and then five from the west side of it. The stone thus indicated, he raised from its bed, disclosing a thick package of papers.

Selecting one of these from the bundle, he spread it open on his knee.

"Listen, Malet," he said, "and you shall hear one of the pretty secrets of the Third Section. The time when I spent the best part of a day in Prince Ivan's office, I made copies of everything I could find which I believed might some day be of value to you or to me. One of the papers I copied was a partial history of the Skovanief family. Yvonne de Tierney is not a French woman as we have supposed, and as she herself supposes. She was sent, by officials of this government, while she was still a baby, to be reared in the family of a French gentleman in Paris—she and her sister, whom Orloff murdered. Her right name is—or was, before she married De Tierney—Skovanief, and her father and mother are at this moment alive and serving life sentences in Siberia. She does not know this."

"But if Skovanief and his wife are convicts in Siberia, why should the government take so much trouble to preserve the lives of their two daughters?" asked Malet.

"There seems to be the mystery; but it is easily explained by these papers. The plain truth of the matter is that Skovanief is not Skovanief at all. In fact, there never was such a family, that we know of. Skovanief was simply a name which was assumed by one of the sons of the second Alexander, who was the grandfather of the present czar. In other words, Skovanief, now condemned to Siberia, is an own brother of the grand duke who now holds his niece, Yvonne de Tierney, a prisoner. Skovanief was a name by which a prince of the blood chose to marry a woman beneath his station. Neither his father nor his brother, who afterward became Alexander III., could forgive him. He was threatened with all sorts of terrible things, but he loved the woman better than his station and pretended to commit suicide. His father and his brother accepted the pretension as fact. A body, supposed to be the world to be him, was buried in state. He went with his wife to France, where he lived in seclusion. There a son was born, and four years later, twin girls were added to the family. One of those twins became the Princess Romanovskaya and was murdered by Sacha Orloff, who also killed her husband, the chief of the Third Section; the other is Yvonne de Tierney.

"That is not quite all, Malet: Skovanief's son was a royal prince. Some day, if he lived, he was more than likely to discover the facts of his lineage, and make trouble for the Romanoff family; therefore, before he was two years old, he was stolen from his father and mother. Later, when the twins were learning to walk, the entire Skovanief family disappeared, and from that day to this, nothing has been heard of them. The parents are in Siberia under another name. The son has disappeared and is doubtless a member of one of the families of St. Petersburg, believing that he belongs to it. Yvonne is all that is left."

"But is it possible that the grand duke knows all this? Is it possible that, knowing Yvonne to be his niece, he would make love to her?" asked Malet.

"I cannot answer those questions. I only know that he is the man who absorbed all the properties of his supposed dead brother. I know that he was instrumental in stealing the son away from his brother, and, doubtless, knows where that son is now. These records do not give that. I know that he does know that Yvonne is his niece, and that she herself has no idea of the relationship. He hates her, naturally; he also adores her beauty, for she is no doubt the most beautiful woman in Europe. To what depths his villainy might descend, who can say, but history is not without its records of kings who have married their nieces."

"True for you, Nick."

"Everyone of the members of the grand council of the Russian empire—the men who rule the nation, is familiar with this history. It is possible that it is half forgotten by some of them by this time, but the slightest reference to it would refresh their memories. The only man who has any direct interest in the matter who does not know the story, and who has never heard the story, is Yvonne's own cousin, the present czar, Nicholas."

"By Jove, Nick, that's true."

The detective refolded the paper and replaced it with the others in the aperture beneath the stone in the floor; then slowly, he said:

"When I rescued Yvonne from the power of the grand duke, after the murder of Princess Romanovskaya,

I warned him that I had read the secrets of the Third Section. Now, Malet, that bit of information frightened him, because he is aware that I know the true history of Yvonne, of his brother who now languishes in Siberia as one Skovaniel, and, in short, the whole awful story. Now, think a moment: Does what I have just said suggest anything to you?"

"Not a thing. I don't follow you. What do you mean?"

"Simply this: The grand duke did not mean that I should leave Russia. This entire scheme of capturing Yvonne is only to get me into his power; when he gets me, he intends to make me give up these copies of the Third Section papers, and then he intends to kill me and to kill you whom he knows to be my confidant."

Nick paused for a moment and then continued:

"There is no doubt in my mind that the first note I received from Yvonne is in her handwriting. I have my doubts about the second, and yet it looks real. But the one truth that is more prominent than anything else to me, is that the grand duke schemed so that she should have a chance to write them, for he knew that I would not leave St. Petersburg if she was in danger and I knew of it. Now, Malet, I am just as certainly expected at that house to-night as if I had sent my card announcing my coming, and it is just as sure as the day is long that the duke and his men will be on the watch for me, and that they mean that I shall never leave that house again, dead or alive."

"Then——"

"But I am going there, just the same; and, Malet, I am going alone."

"Look here, Nick——"

"Wait, Malet. I know what you would say, but don't say it! My mind is made up. I am going to the grand duke's house to-night, and I'm going there alone."

CHAPTER VII.

BEARDING THE LION IN HIS DEN.

This was one of the times when Nick Carter felt that he desired no disguise—that arm and limb, wit and movement of muscle would respond more quickly to his requirements if they were untrammelled by efforts at concealment.

The darkness of the night would be sufficient concealment while he was on his way to the house of the grand duke, and, once he had penetrated to the inside of that mysterious residence, all the disguises in the world would not avail to protect him if he were discovered there.

He was face to face with a great peril, and, although he had no idea of the form or shape it might take, he none the less realized its imminence.

The mere thought of it invigorated him. Nick Carter loved danger; that is, when danger was at hand and threatening, he enjoyed the exercise of his mental and physical qualities which were brought into play in pitting himself against it. He did not believe in courting danger any more than he approved of dodging it; and when he announced, as he did to Malet, that he intended going to the house of the grand duke alone, he had decided to do so because he believed it to be the only way in which he could hope successfully to cope with the powers that were concealed there, awaiting him.

It was not possible to attack the house of the grand duke, like that of any ordinary citizen. The entire military of St. Petersburg could be called upon to protect it in such an event.

It would be equally useless to attempt to gain admittance with a few men, or even with two, for either they would fail to get inside at all, or they would be permitted to enter without trouble, only to fall victims to those who were waiting on the other side of the door.

Plainly, there was only one method which offered any idea of practicality, and that was that he visit the house alone, and that he make use of his own great resources to enable him, if possible, to enter the house by stealth, and without the knowledge of the occupants,

notwithstanding the fact that they were on the watch for him; and that is what he had decided to do, if it could be done.

Before he parted with Malet, he gave his last directions, as follows:

"You must not forget, Malet, that you are really in as great danger as I am. I have no doubt at all that the duke has already taken measures to get rid of you as expeditiously as possible. If you should remain around your posts of duty to-night, more than likely some hireling of the duke's would try to assassinate you. It would not surprise me even if the duke should go to the extent of liberating Orloff long enough to put you out of the way; and I cannot imagine anything that would give more pleasure to that fiend."

Malet smiled with amusement.

"A good many have tried to knife me, one time and another," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes. I know that. Orloff hasn't tried it yet, though. However, that has nothing to do with present requirements. I shall start now, in a moment. Within half an hour, if you will take Boris and two or three of your best men, I would like to have you go to the vicinity of the duke's home, conceal yourselves, and wait. I don't want you to do a single thing unless I call for you. I only want to feel that you are there within call. No matter what happens in the house or around it, do nothing unless you hear me whistle our old call."

It was quite dark when Nick departed from the little house under the palace wall; it was pitch dark when he arrived in front of Mme. Gourki's residence.

There he paused for a moment beneath a street lamp, and, drawing a paper from his pocket, he examined it attentively.

It was one of the bundle of papers that had been secreted beneath the stone floor of Malet's office, and, like the others, it contained one of the many secrets of the terrible Third Section.

This is what he read from it:

"The precious mirror at the south end of the room is decorated with gilded rose buds and leaves. The third leaf from the bottom on the right-hand side

opens as on a hinge. Beneath the leaf is a spring, which, if pressed, will cause the mirror to open. Beyond it is the passage. There are no other doors, and there is only one passage. The other end is arranged in precisely the same manner, and opens into the library of the grand duke's villa. The springs may be readily discovered from the passage side of either door; on the library side of each door they are the same."

The detective refolded the paper and returned it to his pocket.

"I think," he mused, "that it will be a very simple matter to get inside the villa of the grand duke after I have once succeeded in entering this house here. But I've got to get into this one first. The way to do that appears to me to be over the wall from this alley."

He turned into the same alley where Philip had used the vaulting pole with such good results an hour earlier, and, having traversed half the distance through the alley, came upon the self same pole.

His method of mounting the wall when he had the pole in hand was simple and expeditious. Another might not have done it so readily, for only a person of Nick Carter's marvelous muscular strength could have accomplished it; but to observe him, it seemed as simple as ascending an ordinary flight of stairs.

He simply stood one end of the pole firmly on the flagging while he grasped it high above his head, firmly with his left hand. That done, he crouched a little and then sprang lightly straight up into the air, and he sprang so surely that his right hand caught the top of the wall. Now, he was simply in the position of one who is hanging to a pair of parallel bars, and it only remained for him to draw himself up between them, although one bar was represented by a perpendicular pole and the other by a solid wall.

Still, it was a case of lifting himself by his own strength past his own chin, and that was child's play for Nick Carter.

In another moment he was astride of the wall, and the pole had been drawn up after him and dropped into the yard, where, possibly, there might be use for it again.

He had crossed the wall at almost precisely the same

point where Philip vaulted it, and consequently when he leaped to the ground, he found himself before the very window by which Philip had entered the house, although, of course, Nick had no idea that Philip had been there before him.

The window offered opportunities; besides, there was darkness on the other side of it, and Nick wished to work in the dark, as well as silently.

Although Philip had arranged the fastenings on the inside, it required only a moment for the detective to undo them with one of his delicate instruments, and in another moment he stood within the same room where less than an hour before the grand duke had announced to Orloff that it was his intention soon to deliver Nick Carter to the embrace of his pet python—and where, concealed behind the curtain, Philip had heard the terrible statement.

Before Nick parted with Malet, he had provided himself with everything which he believed he might need to use on his dangerous expedition.

Belted around his body, under his waistcoat, was his wonderful case of instruments, each one small in size and weight, but mighty in execution. Little saws which would cut through steel as a knife cuts through butter; scissors that would clip through a wire nail like a razor through cheese; wonderful little augers and drills, delicate pick-locks—every sort of tool, in short, that might under any emergency become useful, and each one invented and made by his own hands after long years of experience.

Apparently he was unarmed, but in his sleeves reposed those wonderful little weapons which were as great mysteries to his friends as to his enemies; those two delicate pistols held in place by spiral springs, which he could by one motion of either arm throw into his grasp, fire and release so quickly that a person watching him could not know from whence came the report and the consequences of it.

A moment seemed to satisfy the detective that the room was unattended save by himself, and he reached the ceiling of his electric light and looked around him.

"Well, this is what one might call luck," he thought. "I have come directly into the very room I wanted to

find, for this is the library. It isn't long since somebody was here, too, for I smell cigar smoke."

He crossed to the table in the center of the room and raised from an ash tray the butt of a cigar that was not yet extinguished. Then he smiled.

"It isn't more than ten minutes since the grand duke held that cigar butt between his big teeth," he mused. "If I had been here just a little sooner I might have had the distinguished pleasure of seeing him. Hello! What is this?"

His foot had trodden upon an obstruction, and, stooping, he raised a common button from the floor.

"I don't believe there are any other buttons like this one in Russia, save on Philip Pommery's coat," he said to himself, regarding it attentively. "This business is getting interesting. The duke has got his fingers on the lad in some way. Anyhow, the boy has been inside this room, and it isn't very likely that he would get here unless he was brought here. The grand duke has been here too, so it must be that he came through the underground passage, for he wouldn't care to have people seen entering and leaving by the front door during the absence of Mme. Gourki."

He crossed the room to the door which communicated with the hall and opened it cautiously, but everything was dark on the other side.

Then, one by one he visited the rooms on the ground floor, but, although many of them showed evidences of recent occupancy, they were now untenanted. Then he ascended to the second floor, but the result was the same; and after that he returned to the library, opened the rose-leaf beside the mirror, pressed the spring that was hidden under it, and in a moment more stepped through the opening into the passage and pulled the secret door shut behind him.

"Now," he thought, as he made his way along the passage toward the house of the grand duke, "now begins the serious work of the night. I have had too much luck in the beginning to have it last, and now I've got two things instead of one to do. I must find Yvonne, if she is here, and I must find Philip. I sent that fellow Orloff away, and I must get him out of it."

He had arrived at the end of the passage when he

ceased speaking, and his light at once revealed the locality of the inside spring. Pausing, he listened for a moment with his ear against the door, and, hearing no sound from beyond it, he pressed against the spring. This caused the door to swing open before him, but ere it had created an aperture six inches wide, Nick's hand shot forward and held it.

It was well that he did so, for the grand duke himself sat facing the spot where Nick Carter stood concealed behind the mirror.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HOUSE OF REPTILES.

The grand duke was not alone.

Little Phil Pommery, with his feet tied together and a cord passed around him and the chair in which he was seated, was gazing defiantly into the eyes of the big man, and two other men were standing near, looking on, and evidently striving to conceal their amusement, lest the evidence of it might offend their master.

The duke held a watch in one hand, and now he closed it with a snap.

"Time's up, young man," he said. "I have waited five minutes, and now I shall send you up to play with my pets; that is, if you are still decided to hold your tongue. Do you relish the idea of being eaten by a snake?"

"I prefer it to the kind you see crawling around you every once in a while," retorted Phil.

"Come, I'll give you another chance; but this is the last one. What were Nick Carter's plans about to-night, when you left him?"

"He didn't have any. Never knew him to have any."

The grand duke smiled coldly.

"I see you are obdurate," he said, "so upstairs you go. Take him away, Stevie. You need not put him inside the cage yet. I think I would like to be there when you do that. Keep him outside, but where he can get a good view of my pet, till I come."

The two men released Philip from the chair and bore him away. Then, very soon, the big grand duke looked up from his seat, and, rising, left the room by an-

other door, and Nick, perceiving that there was now no one to bar his progress, stepped through into the lighted room and closed the mirror shut behind him.

Without an instant's hesitation he crossed the room to the door through which the grand duke had made his exit, and followed him.

It opened into another room, and the grand duke was just passing through a second door through which Nick also pursued him.

This last room appeared at first to be in darkness, but a second glance told the detective that there was a mellow light which stole into it from above; and then he perceived that it was in reality no room at all, but rather a well into which a huge glass cage had been fitted from above.

There was room to walk upright beneath the bottom of the glass cage, and there was room at the sides, where winding iron stairways ascended on either side and at each end of it, to platforms which extended all the way around it midway between the top and the bottom.

From where Nick was standing he could not see the contents of the cage, which was at least thirty feet long, by twenty feet wide and twelve feet deep.

The top of it he could see was covered by a grating, and also that from the top it was evident that a great room of the full length and breadth of the house extended in every direction around it.

"This, then," he thought, "is the grand duke's reptile house, of which so much has been said and so little believed. Here is where he keeps his pets, and up there, somewhere, is where they have taken Philip. It is hard to believe that they would give him to a snake, but still I haven't a doubt that the grand duke would enjoy the sight. Scratch a Russian and you uncover a Tartar; scratch a Tartar and uncover a fiend."

The duke had opened the cage and descended into the great room at the top, and Nick, noticing that the place up there was brilliantly lighted and feeling that he could, therefore, move about below them with little fear of discovery, followed him slowly up the iron stairway.

When he raised his head above the level of the floor,

he was nearly startled into an exclamation of self-betrayal at what he saw.

The room—if it might be called a room—occupied the entire length and breadth of the house, and was, therefore, more than a hundred feet long and fully fifty feet in width. It was roofed over with glass, was heated to a degree that was almost suffocating, and was literally filled from end to end with palms, exotics, and tropical plants of every description.

Among the palms and tropical verdure, there were literally hundreds of snakes of almost every size and description. They hung suspended from boughs of palm trees; they were clustered in bunches in notches and upon rocks that had been erected for the purpose; they crawled hither and thither among the grasses that grew upon the foot or two of earth with which the floor was covered; they were everywhere. Large and small; hideous and beautiful, but most hideous and more beautiful than all the others, was one great python which occupied a huge, upholstered rack all to himself.

His length could not be guessed at a mere glance, but it must have been very great. His body around the middle was thicker and greater in circumference than Nick Carter's thigh; and he was coiled and twisted in dizzy masses around the rack upon which he rested, while at least ten feet of the upper part of his body hung down toward the center of the room, and there he kept his head swinging back and forth, up and down, to and fro, to the time of a tune which the grand duke was whistling; and all the time his tongue, with its evil jerking, darted in and out in evident delight.

But that was not all that Nick saw when he raised his head above the floor.

He was, himself, at the very edge of a huge, circular, iron screen, shaped like a dome, and which occupied the very center of the enormous room. The iron screen was reinforced by a transparent wire gauze, and as the brilliant lights were outside the net and screen, the reptiles in the miniature jungle were as plainly to be seen as if there had been no impediment between them and the observer.

Not was that all.

There were other occupants of the room, beside the snakes and the grand duke.

The space within the iron screen was furnished sumptuously. It is true that it smelled horribly, for snakes are most odoriferous; but the elegance of the place was doubtless designed to offset this shortcoming. Divans, couches, thick pillows, tables, easy-chairs, were strewn everywhere around the circular apartment.

Upon one of these couches, with a heavy gold chain locked around her waist and again made fast to the floor near her, was Yvonne. Her face was as white as the face of a corpse, and her eyes were closed, as if they shut out the horrible sights she was compelled to witness if she opened them; but her bosom was heaving, and Nick knew that she was conscious.

Near her, upon a second divan, also fastened by the same form of golden chain, and in the same manner, was Philip. Close beside the duke stood the man, Steven, and both were gazing in evident pleasure at the reptile which was keeping time to the whistling of a tune by his master.

The third man—the one who had been with the duke and Steven when Nick discovered them in the library—was nowhere to be seen.

Everything that has been described at such considerable length, appeared to Nick Carter in two or three quick glances; almost, in fact, within a second of time.

The great jungle room, the myriad of snakes, the wonderful python, the duke whistling to it, Steven, Yvonne and Philip and their golden chains—and the absence of the other man.

This last discovery was what startled Nick into turning his head and looking back down in the direction from which he had come.

He had not heard a sound nor felt a movement of the spiral stairway on which he was standing, but, nevertheless, that third man had managed to approach to a point within reaching distance at the moment when Nick discovered him.

Evidently he had seen Nick enter the bank room below and had followed him stealthily up the winding stairs. At the instant when Nick turned his head, the fellow had drawn back a looped rope and was actually

in the act of throwing it over the detective's head—but the rope never left his hand; Nick Carter acted much too quickly for him.

The instant he discovered the man behind him and ready to cast the loop, Nick released his hold upon the hatchlike railing to which he had been clinging, and, before the fellow could move or cry out, he had permitted himself to drop bodily upon him, at the same instant grasping him around the throat with his right hand, and seizing upon the rail of the iron stairs with his left; and there, for a moment they hung suspended in the air, Nick holding the weight of his own and the other man's body with his left hand, while with his right he choked him into unconsciousness; and then, after a moment or two, he swung himself against the stairs again, regained his foothold, and with the now unconscious man in his arms, descended rapidly to the bottom.

CHAPTER IX.

A BATTLE WITH A PYTHON.

It was the work of a very few moments for the detective to convey the unconscious form of his captive to the library—which was the only room in the house that seemed available to him just then. Cords from the pictures that hung against the wall served the purposes of ropes with which to bind him, and a handkerchief thrust into his mouth was sufficient gag, in case the man should recover consciousness too soon. Then the limp and senseless body was thrust beneath a couch, and Nick made his way again up the spiral stairs toward the jungle room.

But the scene had changed, even during the short interval he was absent.

When he arrived at the top of the stairs he was astonished to discover that the grand duke and his companion, Steven, had disappeared, and that Yvonne and Philip Pommery were alone together in the cage-like, dome-shaped room.

One glance told Nick that much; also that the golden chains had been unfastened; and, also, with a full realization of the horror it portended, Nick saw that an entire side of the iron grating had been thrown open, and that, moreover, it was locked back against the other part of the grating so that it was impossible to close it again without the key.

Already more than one of the occupants had thrust

an ugly head through the aperture thus created, and the huge python, as if familiar with the scene that was intended to be enacted, was swinging farther out from its perch on the rack, and swaying so that its ugly head passed and repassed the doorway.

All this the detective discovered at a glance; and in that same instant he realized that if he saved either one or both of the intended victims from the awful death which threatened them, he had not a second of time to lose.

He acted so quickly upon his discovery that there was not a perceptible pause in his advance. Almost the instant his head was above the level of the floor, he leaped into the terrible room and started toward Yvonne, whose eyes were closed as if to shut out the horrible sights that confronted her.

But, quickly as he acted, he had scarcely cleared the hatchway—the opening in the floor can be designated by no other name—when he heard a mocking laugh behind him.

He wheeled just in time to see the iron grating close over the hatch, and to hear the bolts underneath shot into place, while the heavy voice of the grand duke came to him from somewhere over his head.

"Walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly," it said, mockingly. "I thought you would come, Carter, and now you can see what a glorious reception I have prepared for you."

At the side of the great room, in a gallery that was protected by another screen, Nick could see the grand duke and Steven looking down upon the scene, and the man who had royal blood in his veins was rubbing his hands together in an excess of pleasurable anticipation of the spectacle he was about to witness.

The hatch, by which Nick had entered the room, was irretrievably closed and locked. How the act had been accomplished, Nick neither knew nor cared. That it was closed, and that he, with Yvonne and Philip, were prisoners within the den of snakes, was the one paramount fact.

Yvonne opened her eyes when the voice of the grand duke startled her, and, perceiving her champion within a few feet of her, she uttered a glad cry, leaped to her feet and threw herself into Nick Carter's arms; and then, instantly, she fainted away into unconsciousness. The reaction upon her nerves, when she knew that he was there and that he had come to rescue her, was more than she could bear after the terrors through which she had already passed.

In an instant he had placed her unconscious form again upon the couch and leaped toward Philip, for already the head of the python had begun to dart nearer and nearer to him.

The boy did not move. The serpent had caught his eyes with his own blazing orbs, and the boy was already charmed almost into unconsciousness.

But Nick seized him in his arms, raised him from the couch upon which he was seated, and hurled him back into the circular room toward the grating which had so lately been closed to shut off their means of exit.

Torn from the influence of the serpent's eyes, the lad shuddered as if with a spasmodic chill, and when Nick hurled him behind him, fell into a senseless and quivering heap upon the floor.

But Nick Carter did not know that, for he had no time to look at Philip.

The serpent demanded his immediate attention.

Angered because the victim he had already charmed was torn thus ruthlessly from his influence, the monster reptile drew back its head until its neck and half its body was of the shape of a figure 2, and then darted forward, like a flash of lightning, full at this new victim, who had so suddenly taken the place of the old one.

There are things in the world which can happen so quickly that it is next to impossible to describe them, and the reader must, therefore, bear in mind that the events which took place in that den of serpents, followed one another with the rapidity of the tapping of a trip hammer—as rapidly, in fact, as a person could count one, two, three, four, etc.

Nick's appearance in the hatchway; the voice of the grand duke from the gallery; the banging shut of the hatch; the awakening and the fainting of Yvonne; the throwing her upon the couch; the seizing of Philip and casting him backward; the drawing back of the python's head and its lightning-like launching forward toward Nick, were incidents which followed one another almost as rapidly as the flashing of a biograph.

As rapid as they were, however, they were not quicker than was Nick Carter himself.

It was his left hand that seized upon Philip and threw him backward, and it was his right hand that flew upward and forward at the same instant, with almost the same motion that a boy would employ in throwing a baseball.

And when his hand flew forward, there appeared in

its grasp, as if by magic, one of the wonderful pistols he carried in his sleeves.

The python's head was not three feet from Nick Carter when the flash came, and it was moving with almost the swiftness of an arrow; but a bullet can move even faster.

The effect of that bullet was remarkable.

It crashed unerringly through the serpent's brain, but it could not stop the forward movement of the weight of that huge body, and it struck Nick Carter full on his breast, hurling him backward with a sudden velocity that sent him, like a projectile from a catapult, hurtling against the bars of the cage at the other side of the dome-shaped inclosure.

And then, it seemed as if the room were suddenly filled with writhing, thrashing serpents,

Imagine, if you can, the huge body of that terrible reptile.

It was almost thirty feet in length, and along the middle it was as thick as a big man's thigh. Try to conceive some idea of such a monster, suddenly transformed into a whiplash, possessing the strength of an elephant, the quickness and elasticity of a rubber band, and a weight of four hundred or more pounds, and you will have some idea of the havoc it might accomplish if ungoverned.

It was like a huge steel spring suddenly liberated from its fastenings, recoiled again and again, over and over, and as many times liberated.

The serpent had a bullet through its brain and was dying, but it died hard.

It could no longer act with purpose; it was no longer gloating upon what it might destroy and consume; it no longer possessed intelligence in any form, but it seemed to have somehow added tenfold to its awful strength; and its shining, glistening body, propelled by the force of its own attack upon Nick Carter, was precipitated entirely through the opening in the grating into the inclosure.

Nick, as has been said, was hurled against the grating at the opposite side of the room, and with a force that almost drove the breath from his body—and, fortunately for him, he fell to the floor.

The couch upon which he had thrown the fainting form of Yvonne was close at hand, and, still unconscious and unaware of the terrible events that were happening, she was stretched upon it. Philip Pomery was within reach of the detective's hand.

Nick knew something of the consequences of sending

a bullet through a serpent's head, and of the necessity of getting beyond the reach of the terrible slaying of the dying reptile.

The instant he fell, he seized the couch and turned it over so that Yvonne fell to the floor beside him, and then, with a quick motion, he pushed her under and behind its protection, crawled behind it himself and dragged Philip after him.

And then for a quarter of an hour it seemed as if pandemonium had broken loose.

The iron grating, which created the inclosure, was torn from its fastenings, piecemeal, and hurled in broken fragments hither and thither all over the great jungle room.

The remaining couches and chairs which had decorated the place were smashed into splinters, but, fortunately for the prisoners beneath the one couch that Nick had overturned, two large sections of the grating fell upon it so that it was pinned down and could not be broken, and also in a manner which effectually protected the three persons who were under it from harm.

The demolishment of the grating also served another purpose, for it liberated the writhing body of the serpent from its too close quarters; and, as if on destruction bent, the body of the reptile writhed and thrashed hither and thither in every direction, across the great room, tearing down and destroying everything it touched with its awful, whiplike strength.

Within fifteen minutes of the time when Nick fired the bullet into the python's head, the entire space inclosed within that superbly appointed jungle room was a mass of ruins.

The growing palms were uprooted and threshed into heaps of refuse and rubbish. The beds of exotics were laid waste as effectually as if the place had been visited by a Kansas tornado. The flowering plants and shrubs were stripped of every semblance of what they had once been, as if a frost had blighted them and a reaper had cut them down. The racks upon which hundreds of snakes of different kinds and colors had been coiled into masses of knots, like bunches of angle worms, were torn from their fastenings and hurled first one way and then another across the room, and the frightened serpents, awakened thus rudely from their slumbers, glided hither and thither, hissing and squirming, and much more greatly astonished and frightened to be, for the moment, dangerous.

Nick Carter, however, knew very well that the time would be very short before the angry reptiles would

infest every inch of the place, and that in their rage they would attack whatever happened to be in their way; he knew also that there were many specimens there whose bite would be deadly poison, and, more than all, he realized that they would run for cover as rapidly as they could, in order to escape the thrashing blows of the body of the python, and that the space underneath the couch where they were hiding would be almost the first place they would seek, as offering protection.

Now it so happened that the overturned couch was directly above the grated hatch through which the detective had gained his entrance to the room, and so, even while the huge folds of the python were still thrashing above him, Nick had recourse to the belt of tools already mentioned as fastened around his body under his waistcoat.

The hatch was fastened down by a chain which was drawn tightly around one of the bars, and then through a staple underneath, and this, in turn was held together by a padlock.

The little, metal saw which the detective extracted from his belt, cut through the chain with surprising ease and quickness, and, before Yvonne had recovered from her fainting spell and ere Philip had thrown off entirely the effect of gazing into the eyes of the serpent as he had done, Nick had raised the hatch, dropped through it, pulled them both, one after the other, through after him, and fixed the grating back into place.

"Quick, now, Fitz," he said to the boy, speaking sharply. "Pull yourself together and follow me. We haven't a moment to lose. The grand duke, up there in the gallery, believes that we are still under the couch, and he will wait where he is till the snakes have had time to drive us out. He thinks that we cannot escape from the room, and we must get out of the house before he knows better. Come!"

He took Yvonne in his arms as if she were a mere child and rapidly descended the spiral stairs, followed by the boy.

To pass with his burden through the two rooms and into the library, was the work of a moment only, and to pull aside the gold leaf that concealed the spring which moved the mirror, thus admitting them to the secret passage between the reptile house and the residence of Mme. Gerbier, was a mere incident; and by the time they had gained the room in which the grand duke had entered into his compact with Siegmund Orloff, Yvonne's consciousness returned.

"Malet, with Boris and others, is waiting somewhere

near here," said Nick to Philip. "He will have a carriage. Skip out, lad; run through the alley toward the other house. If you shout 'Carter!' he will answer you. Send him here as quickly as possible."

CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN'S UNSPOKEN LOVE.

Nick had placed Yvonne upon an easy-chair, and he stood looking down upon her pale and beautiful face after Philip had gone upon his errand.

The ordeal through which she had passed had been a terrible one—sufficient to destroy the reason of a strong man, and he studied her with great solicitude, wondering if she would ever recover from the effects of her terrors; and while he regarded her, she opened her eyes, looked up at him and smiled.

"I knew you would save me," she whispered, while tears glistened in her matchless eyes. "I don't think there was a moment when I did not know that you would come to my aid, and save me from the horrors of that reptile house. I kept my eyes closed all the time, and would not look upon the terrors the grand duke had prepared for me, and so there was not a moment when I was really terrorized. It was horrifying, but I was never once really afraid. And then you appeared; I remember nothing from the moment I saw you there, until now; and now, I am safe, you are safe, and Philip, the boy—did he not leave the room only now?"

"Yes, Yvonne. We are all safe for the present. Malet will soon be here with a carriage."

"And you saved me! Was it awful up there in that awful room? Tell me what you did up there?"

"I really did very little, myself," replied Nick, smiling. "The python did most of the work for me."

"The python?" she asked, surprised at his answer.

"Yes. The python went on a rampage—sort of ran amok, you know. He tore things loose. I shouldn't wonder if they are having a circus up there yet, and that duke is doubtless waiting for us to appear to fight the snakes. I'll tell you all about it another time. I am more interested just now in knowing how you feel, for I want you to feel strong and well, notwithstanding what you have passed through."

"Oh, I do, I do!"

"Strong enough to go through a second ordeal this very night, Yvonne?"

"Strong enough for anything in the world if you are near me," she replied, rising from her chair and stepping quickly toward him.

He drew back a little and she paused, stretching out both hands toward him.

"Take hold of my hands," she said. "I want to tell you something—and I want you to listen."

"Hush, Yvonne," he said, but he took her hands in his, held them so for an instant, and then led her back to the seat she had occupied. "There are some things that are best left unsaid; things which may be understood, perhaps the more perfectly, because their meanings are never uttered by word of mouth."

He bent over her and touched her forehead with his lips, and then stepped back away from her again.

It was a caress of infinite respect; such a caress as a father might offer to his daughter, a brother to his sister—a caress infinitely tender, infinitely sympathetic, but full of dignity. Such a caress as builds an impassable shield between the giver and the recipient.

Nevertheless, Yvonne's face became for one instant a shade whiter than it had been during all the terrors she had passed through; but it was only for an instant, for then it flushed as red as a rose, and her lips parted in a smile so tender that all the great wealth of love she felt for the man before her for one instant stood exposed in her eyes and upon her lips; but for one instant only, then she controlled herself, as she said, very quietly.

"Thank you. I will remember. I will never forget. And now, will you let me tell you something? I have a confession to make—your forgiveness to ask. Will you listen?"

"Yes. What is it, Yvonne?"

"This: It was largely my own fault that I was brought here—here to that den of reptiles. I might have escaped it; but I chose to subject myself to the danger."

"You chose it? What do you mean?"

"This: I learned, through a servant who served my sister and who was always devoted to me, of a plot that was hatched by the grand duke to get you in his power. It appeared that you had somehow learned many of the secrets of the Third Section, or, at least, the duke believed you had. He was determined that you should not leave Russia. The railway coach of the train in which you were to leave St. Petersburg, belongs to the government. It is built of steel. The compartments, once closed from the outside, can only be opened

from the outside. The moment you entered that train and the door closed behind you, you would have been a prisoner as effectually in solitary confinement as if you were in a dungeon beneath the old prison. Outside the city the coach was to be sidetracked, and you were to be delivered over to the duke."

"Ah! I begin to see through it all now."

"I learned these things only just in time to prevent you from taking that train. I was in no danger when I sent you the note. I merely wanted to prevent you from taking that car, and, if possible, to see you and to warn you before you had a chance to start again. I knew that the only way to keep you here was to make you believe that I was in danger. You would not have hesitated on account of any threatening danger to yourself."

"No. That is true."

"After I sent the note, I ordered myself driven to the house of Mme. Gourki. Here, where we are now. I did not know that she was absent from the city. At the same time, believing myself to be thoroughly safe, I sent a peremptory summons to the duke to meet me here."

"But, Yvonne; the note which Philip delivered was thrown from the window of the duke's house. How was that?"

"It was there where I learned the secret of the plot against you. I had gone there with the minister of the interior and his secretary, in the duke's absence, to recover some property which the grand duke had told him belonged to my sister, and which I should have. The person who told me of the plot, and who had once served my sister, now serves the duke. I wrote the note quickly, saw the boy passing, and threw it out of the window to him."

"Then why did you think it necessary to thrust yourself into the power of the duke, after that?" asked Nick.

"I was brava. I believed I could defy him. I believed he would not dare to injure you if he knew that I held the secret of his plot against you. I came here. He laughed at me. He even told me that he knew about the note I had sent to you, and that he had used it as a decoy to get you here. That the boy who

delivered it was permitted to do so, purposely, and that he intended to send a second note in imitation of my handwriting—and then he told me about the snakes. He said he intended to give you to the python, and he took me through the passage into the cage to show it to me."

"And that is how I happened to find you in the inclosure, with the golden chain around you?"

"Yes."

They were interrupted at that moment by a shrill whistle from the outside, and Nick knew that Malet was there with a carriage.

"Malet," said Nick, when they were driving with all speed, "I have yet much to do before the night is over. What time is it now?"

"Not yet half-past ten," replied Malet.

"The Imperial Council meets to-night, you told me."

"Yes."

"At what time, and where does it meet?"

"The Imperial Council always meets at midnight, and always in the private library of the czar. He will not have it meet anywhere else, nor at any other time. It is a whim of his."

"I am glad of it, for it exactly fits my purposes. The grand duke is a member of the council, is he not?"

"Yes. The czar is not a member of the council himself, but he has a voice in its proceedings, of course; that is, he is supposed to have. As a matter of fact, he has no more power there than you or I have."

"But the council meets at midnight, and in the private library—the room to which the secret passage from the little house under the palace wall leads."

"Yes."

"Well, Malet, in America we have our West a fashion of holding up railroad trains, national banks and citizens, and to-night I am going into the hold-up business."

"The hold-up business! What do you mean, Nick?" asked Malet.

"I mean, my friend, that before you are two hours older I am going to hold up a nation, and make it sweat and deliver."

CHAPTER XI.

THE LITTLE GIANT RULES THE WORLD.

"Malet," said Nick, when they had sent the carriage away, and were grouped together in the little house under the palace wall—Nick, Yvonne, Malet, Boris and Philip—"I have a presentiment that this is the last night which any of those who are present here will ever spend in St. Petersburg. Your usefulness here is past, at least so long as the grand duke is alive, for Philip has already told you that he has set Orloff on your track. You cannot both live in the same empire; you can't kill him, and therefore you have got to leave. Isn't that true?"

"Quite true; and I am glad it is. I'll go to America with you, perhaps; or back to Paris, where there is always work for me to do."

"Good. And Boris, being your assistant, must also get out; so, I take it, you will take him with you wherever you go."

"I will follow Col. Malet wherever he goes, Mr. Carter," said Boris.

"Good again. Now, Mr. Pommery Sec, I don't suppose you have any desire to remain in St. Petersburg, have you?"

"What! Stay here? Gee! Well, I guess nit!" replied Fiz, with a grin.

Nick turned again to Malet.

"Has it occurred to you to wonder how we are going to get out of Russia at all?" he asked, quietly.

"It has occurred to me mighty forcibly that we can't do it," replied Malet, emphatically. "You or I, possibly Boris, might do it; mind you, I say 'might' do it alone, but—"

"But you have about made up your mind that it is Siberia or death for us all, haven't you?" said Nick, smiling.

"Well, I'll confess that I had figured about that way until—"

"Well, until what?"

"Until you spoke about holding up the imperial council. I don't know what the game is, but I suppose you do, and you have a way of carrying things through that you start out to do, you know. What's the game?"

"Dead easy, since I have got you all with me. I propose to have the czar himself conduct us to Kronstadt."

"Good heavens, Nick, what do you mean to do?"

"What will appear to be the craziest thing, but which will be the wisest thing I ever did in my life. Admiral Evans, on board the armored cruiser *New York*, is now in the harbor of Kronstadt. He sails at noon to-morrow for Havre. I mean Fighting Bob Evans; you know him, don't you?"

"I know of him."

"He is one of my friends. He sails to-morrow noon. There is a train from here for Kronstadt at three in the morning. It is now almost midnight. Do you begin to catch on?"

"No."

"The imperial council meets now, in thirty minutes. There is a secret passage, which you and I have often traversed together and singly, from this little house, directly into the room where the council meets. We will attend the meeting, and rest assured that I will succeed in prevailing upon the czar to go with us in person to Kronstadt. As they say in Texas, 'You watch my smoke!'"

* * * * *

The members of the imperial council of the Russian empire were seated together in the private room of the czar. The grand duke, as a member of the council, was present, and he was not in a pleasant mood since his favorite pet had just been destroyed and his reptile house demolished. Nevertheless, he was there.

The czar in person was there also. He was seated somewhat apart from the others, and his careworn and melancholy face wore a decided frown. The remaining four who occupied the room were the real arbiters of fate for the Russian empire.

The grand duke was addressing the others in his most decided accent, and each was paying the closest attention to what he was saying, when all were startled by a strange voice which broke in unceremoniously upon their counsel. In the Russian language and in an unaccountably emphatic manner it said:

"Gentlemen, if one of you should cry out for assistance, I will drop this bomb and we will all die here together. If, on the other hand, you harken to what I have to say, not a single person will be injured."

Some of them half started to their feet; others were too frightened to move; all turned their heads toward the sound of the voice, and all saw Nick Carter standing in the opening of the secret passage, holding in his hand an article which appeared to be a bomb, and to the eyes of a Russian official there is nothing so terrible and horrible as a bomb. In reality, what Nick held, ready to drop to the floor, was not a bomb at all, but it looked like one, and that was sufficient.

Behind Nick, each holding a revolver raised and ready for use, were the members of his party—Yvonne, Malet, Boris and Philip.

Strangely enough, the czar himself was the first to break the silence which followed the detective's announcement.

"I know you, sir," he said, quite calmly. "You have been in this room before, and you always come with a threat. What is it that you desire now?"

"I have come here for two reasons, your majesty," responded Nick. "One is to tell you a short story and to introduce to you again this lady whom you know as the Comtesse de Tierney, but who is also your majesty's own cousin, and a niece of the brute who sits at your right hand. Listen, sir."

Nick began and related to the end the story of the czar's uncle, which has already been told in these pages. Having finished that, he launched into a description of some of the secrets of the Third Section, which he held; then he told of the conspiracy of the grand duke against his emperor; then he related the events of the night, and called upon the czar to order the house of the grand duke closed until he could investigate its truth; and then he held up the package of papers which he had recovered from beneath the flooring under the little house.

"This, your majesty," he said, "contains every secret which has been cherished since the beginning of the reign of your grandfather. Its contents will be useless to me after I am away from Russian soil, and when you have delivered me, and my friends, as I shall presently request you to do, I will give it into your hands. There are many things told about here which are familiar to the men who are now seated around you, but of which you have been kept in ignorance, on the supposition that you are not fit to rule your own people.

"Your majesty, you are widely supposed to rule all Russia. By your own people you are said to rule the world. Just now, and until you deliver these friends of mine and myself safely into the custody of Admiral Evans, at Kronstadt, I shall rule you; so, sir, it may save your sense of dignity if for the moment you will look upon me as ruling the world. So far as you are concerned I do rule the world just now. Therefore, I command you that you take my friends and me to the train which leaves the station at three, and that from there you conduct us safely to Kronstadt in your personal care, and that in Kronstadt you deliver us in person to the care of Admiral Evans, giving us all words of praise at the parting."

"But, how am I to do all that?" asked the czar, wonderingly. The cool and decided tones of the detective left no doubt in his mind of the sincerity of his utterances.

"It is very simple, your majesty. The grand duke will depart from this room just in advance of us. He will walk between Malet and Boris. They will precede us to the station and notify the guard to pull out your private car and attach it to the train. He will say to them that you are traveling to Kronstadt for reasons of state, and, in a measure, incognito.

"One of the ministers whom we have killed is here—it does not matter which one—it is really Admiral Evans by telegraph of your will!"

stadt. We will follow the grand duke and Malet to the train. On the journey to Kronstadt, your cousin, here, who is really a grand duchess, your majesty and I will occupy one compartment of your car; the grand duke, Malet and Boris will occupy the other. You will command the grand duke to do exactly as I have outlined, for I know only too well that in no other way could anyone of us hope ever to leave Russia alive; and, sir, if we do not leave the country in the manner I have said both your majesty and the grand duke will die before anyone of us shall be captured. I think, with your majesty's permission, that we had best start at once. The ministers whom we leave behind us will know that by silence only can they hope to preserve the life of their emperor."

Nick paused an instant, and the czar bowed his head in the affirmative.

"Malet," said Nick, sharply, "the grand duke is awaiting you." Then he addressed the duke.

"Go with him," he said. "Do as you have heard me say, for I would kill you with as little compunction as I felt when I shot your python—and you know I never miss. Go."

Paris led the way through the secret passage. The grand duke followed, and Malet followed him. When they had consumed sufficient time to have left the little house under the wall, Nick addressed the czar again:

"Your majesty," he said, "I think I need not assure you that you have nothing to fear from me if my directions are carried out. Remember that just now I rule the world, and you are one of my subjects. If you will permit me, I will take your arm. Yvonne, lead the way. Gentlemen and ministers of the empire, members of the imperial council, good-bye!"

It need be said that only one incident occurred to mar the ease of their remarkable journey to Kronstadt, and that happened at the moment of embarkation on the train.

There among a half score of hangers about the station, a man suddenly leaped forth, and with a gleaming knife held aloft in his hand, ran full at Malet, but he halted when a dozen eyes upon them gave the signal of a pistol, and he fell face down upon the station plat-

form, while Nick Carter, who was a few feet behind where he had fallen, and who walked with one arm thrust through the czar's—who was flanked on the other side by Yvonne—called to the guards, who ran forward.

"It is Orloff, escaped, that is all. I have broken his leg. Take him back to prison."

Five minutes later the train, bearing our friends in the order and after the arrangement proposed by the detective, moved out of the station.

And that ends the story of the holding up of a nation by the little giant, and how he ruled the world for a short space of time. In due time they arrived at Kronstadt and were delivered over to the care of the greatest fighter and best-loved man in the United States Navy, and a few days later they disembarked from the swift cruiser in the harbor of Havre, in France.

From there they journeyed together to Paris.

When the moment for parting came between Yvonne and Nick, she held his hand for a moment and looked up into his eyes with an expression of adoration which he never forgot.

"God bless you!" she said. "Good-by."

THE END.

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